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SUBJECT: UKRAINIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS -- ON THE ROAD TO
HAPPINESS AND OTHER VIGNETTES

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SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Embassy Kyiv election observers throughout Ukraine were uniformly impressed by the dedication of election workers and voters. The intensely partisan and mudslinging conduct of the campaign at the national level was not reflected in the Precinct Election Commissions (PECs), where members of both parties cooperated to make the process run smoothly and transparently. Observers' accounts of the balloting ranged from the heartwarming to the bizarre; perhaps the oddest incidents involved the surreptitious use of disappearing ink in several precincts. End summary.

SO, HOW'RE WE DOING?

¶2. (SBU) Embassy observers were warmly greeted almost everywhere, with the exception of a few precincts in Odesa, where the attitude was standoffish or even suspicious. Generally, Ukrainians understood the importance of international observation and appreciated the level of interest in the transparency of their election. In many places observers were offered food and liquid refreshment by the Precinct Election Commission (PEC). There were many questions about how the U.S. conducts balloting -- and unsolicited offers to come and observe the next American elections.

¶3. (SBU) Observers were uniformly impressed by the seriousness of purpose both of the PECs and of the voters. Voters braved bitter cold and icy conditions to cast their ballots, even traveling to precincts by horse-drawn sleigh in rural areas. Extended families came to the precincts together, with small children allowed to drop their grandparents' completed ballots into the box. Some PECs (composed of eight representatives each from the two major parties - Yanukovich's Party of Regions and Tymoshenko's "Bloc Yuliya Tymoshenko") were clearly more efficient and professional than others. The most striking thing, however, was the fact that the animosity between the two candidates at the national level was almost entirely absent in the PECs, whose members cooperated to make the process smooth and transparent. Anxious PEC members sometimes sought our reassurance that they were doing everything correctly; PEC members, domestic observers, and ordinary voters often asked how we thought the whole process was going.

¶4. (SBU) By far the most prosperous precinct visited by the Ambassador and POLCOUNS was in the bedroom community of Shchaslyve ("Happy" or "Fortunate") between Kyiv and Boryspil Airport. The village contained many large homes of well-to-do Ukrainians. The voting took place in a freshly painted school, with new chandeliers hanging in the large

room used for voting. The new gymnasium next to the school was a huge air-inflated dome, with a raucous crowd cheering on a football match inside. The PEC chairman explained that the community was indeed doing well, with many residents who worked in Kyiv and many others at Boryspil Airport.

15. (SBU) One of the most touching moments came in the Darnytsya District of Kyiv, where a man asked the Ambassador and POLCOUNS for assistance getting permission for his wife to vote by mobile ballot box. He explained that he and his wife had come to the precinct earlier in the morning and that she had slipped on the ice outside and broken her leg. She had gone to the hospital, had her leg x-rayed, had been fitted with a cast, and then went home to rest. She insisted on voting, however, and sent her husband back to the precinct to ask that she be allowed to vote by mobile ballot box. The PEC chairwoman explained that, unfortunately, the rules required that all mobile ballots be requested no later than the day before the election. The man would have to go to the local court to get a ruling on whether his wife would be allowed to vote. Clearly embarrassed by the "Catch 22" situation in which she found herself, the PEC chairwoman told the Ambassador that she had called her District Election Commission chairman for advice, and that the latter was on his way to the precinct to sort out the situation. The Ambassador and POLCOUNS had to leave before the final decision was made, but both came away impressed with the determination of at least one Ukrainian woman to do her civic duty and vote.

NOW YOU SEE IT, NOW YOU DON'T

16. (U) One of the curiosities of the February 7 runoff election was the unexplained appearance at several widely

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separated precincts of pens with disappearing ink. Ballots marked with these pens would have the ink vanish a few moments later, and these ballots would presumably be thrown out as invalid during the vote count. The working assumption is that representatives of one party slipped the disappearing-ink pens into precincts where the other party is strong, hoping thereby to invalidate hundreds of votes for the rival candidate.

17. (SBU) Embassy observers were present in a precinct in Donetsk (Yanukovych's home region, where he received over 90% of the vote) when a voter brought a disappearing-ink pen to the PEC's attention. He had stepped into the voting booth, marked his ballot, bent over to tie his shoe, and when he stood back up was then astonished to see that his ballot was blank. He tried the pen on a piece of scrap paper and saw the mark disappear after a few seconds. PEC workers found that the pen was the same as all the others on the outside, but the barrel inside it had been secretly swapped out. Fortunately, the voting booth with the disappearing-ink pen was behind a pillar and had not been used extensively, and the fraud was uncovered relatively early in the day. Several dozen blank ballots that turned up during the counting process were declared invalid.

18. (SBU) Evidently the idea of disappearing ink occurred to both camps. In Bila Tserkva, where Tymoshenko took 69% of the vote, the problem of disappearing ink was not discovered at one precinct until the counting stage, when one-quarter of the ballots turned out to be blank. Embassy observers were treated to a "Florida 2000" exercise in which grannies on the PEC held ballots up to the light trying to discern voter intent from indentations left by the pen with the disappearing ink. Local observers illuminating ballots with cigarette lighters barely avoided setting some of them on fire. Ultimately, the PEC agreed to validate 408 of the original 469 "blank" ballots.

TECHNICAL VIOLATION - NO CAMPAIGNING IN THE PRECINCT!

¶9. (SBU) During an election-observation visit to a local jail, Embassy observers watched as a line of female prisoners was brought into the voting area, which had been erected in the hallway of an isolation-cell row. One of the prisoners was wearing a brand-new blue Yanukovych campaign shirt, which was strikingly bright and clean compared to the dirty clothes worn by the other prisoners. The guards led her away to make her change after the observers noticed her.

WHAT COUNTRY ARE WE IN AGAIN?

¶10. (SBU) The PEC Secretary in a Donetsk precinct had a cellphone with a ringtone that plays the opening bars of the Soviet national anthem. It kept going off throughout the vote count - happily, with no apparent effect on the process.
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